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DRAFT REPORT

Addendum

III. SUBSTANTIVE QUESTIONS (continued)

1. In addressing the substantive questions before the Committee, all delegations reaffirmed the need to strengthen the consensus, and a large number of them expressed the view that the consensus should be a starting-point for future progress, rather than an end in itself. All speakers underscored the newly enhanced role of the United Nations in international affairs, resulting from dramatic changes in the global political environment. It was agreed that, in face of the challenges before the Organization, information had a critical role to play.

2. A large number of delegations reconfirmed their commitment to the basic freedom of information, expression and opinion. They also emphasized the essential relationship between communication and development and the importance of the free flow of information. In that connection, they stressed that violation of press freedom anywhere was a violation of human rights of all. Many welcomed such initiatives as the Windhoek Seminar on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press, organized jointly by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Department of Public Information in May 1991, and expressed their committment to the Windhoek Declaration. One speaker said that his delegation would welcome such a seminar in the Arabian peninsula, and others called for similar seminars in different parts of the world. In view of the somewhat limited participation in the Windhoek Seminar, one delegation noted that the Committee should study the Declaration and submit its comments to the General Assembly. A number of speakers agreed that the Declaration was a milestone in promoting a free press in developing countries, which was one of the most important catalysts of human freedom and development.

3. There was support by several delegations for declaring 3 May Press Freedom Day, as approved by UNESCO. 1/ One Committee member was of the opinion that the proposal merited close attention in the Economic and Social Council. Many speakers supported the right of journalists to seek information freely and condemned any harassment of them.

4. One speaker, on behalf of a number of others, said that disparities existed between developed and developing countries affecting the ability of the public, private and other media to disseminate information, and he said that continuing efforts would be made to assist developing countries in the establishment of communications infrastructures based on the free dissemination of information.

5. Many speakers expressed their continued support for UNESCO and its activities to improve the communications capacities of developing countries, particularly under the International Programme for Development of Communication. 2/ One speaker expressed disappointment that UNESCO did not make a statement before the Committee. A number of delegations stated that UNESCO's new strategy of communication in service of humanity must be implemented in full. They also expressed the hope that the Department of Public Information could break new ground in helping the United Nations contribute to the establishment of a new information and communications order and could increase its cooperation with UNESCO.

6. A number of delegations said that in today's "global village", the developing countries were continuing to be saturated with information originating from the media of the developed countries. In their view, the developing world was struggling to keep up, but the economic disparities and imbalances made that impossible. Those delegations believed that the information gap was widening, and, therefore, the world was far from reaching the goals of a new information and communications order. Many felt that the developing countries were indeed on the defensive to preserve their cultural identities in the face of the developed world's information, while at the same time were unable to get their news out to the world.

7. One speaker referred to television broadcasts from another country, which, he said, were in violation of rulings by the International Frequency Registration Board (IFRB), as well as his nation's sovereignty. He said that that should be of concern to all because the opinion of IFRB was an important issue and potentially affected a large majority of members of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Another representative replied that he believed that IFRB's view was incorrect and could not be substantiated historically and that every participant should share his concern since the volunteered opinion of IFRB potentially affected a large majority of ITU members.

8. Several delegations stressed the importance of cooperative efforts to create skilled manpower in the developing countries and, in that connection, there was much support for the Department's programme for broadcasters and journalists. One speaker emphasized the need for the Department to explore

the possibility of expanding those training courses by involving institutions of higher learning. A number of speakers also expressed support for the Department's cooperation with the News Agencies Pool of Non-Aligned Countries, and for its continuation.

9. In addressing the subject of the public information policies and activities of the United Nations, all speakers expressed their appreciation to the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information for his detailed and enlightening report on the activities of the Department. Most speakers referred to the new climate in international relations, as the world approached the turn of a new century. The United Nations was now at centre stage and thus the Department's role could not be overemphasized or oversimplified. The prestige and credibility of the Organization rested on world public opinion, which the Department of Public Information could help to shape. However, as more was expected of the United Nations, more would be expected of the Department of Public Information. All speakers acknowledged the unprecedented challenges to the Department at the present time and expressed their appreciation for the work it had accomplished during the past year.

10. One speaker, also on behalf of a number of other countries, said that it was important for the Department of Public Information to make maximum use of existing resources in a time of serious financial difficulty for the United Nations. His group felt that the Department had sufficient resources and looked forward to collaborative efforts regarding the best and most efficient utilization of those resources. A number of speakers said that, in view of its financial problems, the Department should re-examine its activities so that it would become more efficient and responsive to new developments.

11. While appreciating changes already implemented, many expressed the belief that the Department could be further streamlined and restructured, as there was still room for improvement. It was suggested that that could be achieved, inter alia, through modernization of its operations, redeployment of resources and elimination of duplication, leading to further enhancement of its effectiveness. It was understood by many that in the face of heavy demands, the Department needed the utmost flexibility in the use of the limited resources at its disposal in order to allow it rapidly to respond to news-breaking developments.

12. A number of representatives commented on the imbalance within the Department of Public Information with regard to geographical distribution of posts, particularly at medium and higher levels. Several delegations said that they remained underrepresented in the Department. One representative said that the level of representation of women from Eastern Europe employed in the Department was inadequate and should be corrected. Another representative expressed his concern over the lack of adequate representation from Asian countries. Another delegation expressed its concern regarding adequate representation from French-speaking African countries, and in particular, the representation of women from that region.

13. It was suggested that a stable public affairs strategy for the United Nations should be elaborated on the basis of the broad political consensus in the Committee. One representative suggested that such an information strategy for the Organization could involve three steps: a newly designed approach to the mass media; an evaluation of the Department's publications; and enhancement of the efficiency of the United Nations information centres. Furthermore, the Department should rely to a greater extent on extrabudgetary resources and contingency funds for emergency tasks.

14. Many delegations commented positively on the Department's work in implementing General Assembly resolutions on priority issues, such as: the question of Palestine and the Palestinian intifadah; the struggle against apartheid; human rights; peace-keeping and peacemaking; and the environment. A few speakers suggested that it was necessary to look at specific mandated activities in the light of new developments, such as in the case of the situation in southern Africa. One speaker said that the Department must strengthen its capacities as an information dissemination agent, but it could also collect information as part of an early warning system for preventive diplomacy.

15. In regard to the Secretary-General's report on implementation of a system-wide information plan for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 3/ all delegations expressed sincere appreciation for the Department's multi-media approach to information for this important Conference which had aroused great international interest and expectations. One delegation expressed appreciation for the fact that brochures, leaflets and general backgrounders for journalists had been issued in Portuguese, in addition to the official languages.

16. In the context of information activities on the environment, a number of speakers expressed appreciation for the Department's cooperation in the work of the Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC), and they welcomed JUNIC's discussions on arrangements for UNCED. One delegation, referring to biotechnological progress in his country, also expressed the hope that at its next session, JUNIC might consider a new strategy for highlighting economic success stories in developing countries.

17. Reference was also made to the Department's valuable coverage of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights and the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

18. In addition to its regular information activities, some speakers raised the subject of the Department's information programmes for special missions. One delegation, on behalf of several others, welcomed the Department's efforts on the dissemination of information in the countries where peace-keeping and peacemaking operations were being carried out. He believed that such programmes could be an important tool in the success of these missions. In that connection, several delegations said that more coverage of such missions was needed and the Committee could recommend to the General Assembly that all such operations have information components. One delegation said that in

regard to peace-keeping activities, the mission in Cambodia would be a challenge. Several delegations noted that they would like to see the Department's publication Blue Helmets published in French and Spanish.

19. With regard to the Secretary-General's report contained in document A/AC.198/1992/4, entitled "United Nations information centres in 1991: allocation of resources and host government assistance", all speakers strongly supported the fundamental importance of the United Nations information centres as a principal means of United Nations "outreach" to the people in both developed and developing countries. It was emphasized that their improved effectiveness was essential to the strengthening of the Department and of the image of the Organization.

20. However, many speakers had deeply felt fundamental problems with the report and, in particular, requested a further clarification of paragraph 14 on the proposed integration of centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). They called for a further delineation of criteria before any steps in that regard were taken. It was suggested by some delegations that open debate on the subject would be appropriate and that a detailed proposal of the contemplated plan was necessary before any decisions could be taken.

21. A group of delegations believed that the current situation of the information centres was not satisfactory, owing primarily to their having been established on an ad hoc basis without, at times, any real consistency as to geographical location or identified needs. They believed that the functions and operations of the centres could benefit from clearer objectives and a fundamental reappraisal of needs and of possible overlap or duplication. They also believed that such an evaluation should be undertaken by the Committee and should contain such elements as: identification of some information centres as regional centres; merging, wherever possible, of separate United Nations offices in the same geographical location; and consideration of decisions on the opening of new centres only upon recommendation by the Secretary-General.

22. Many delegations believed that the Department of Public Information should prepare a comprehensive conceptual framework assessing the future role of the information centres, outlining criteria for their maintenance or establishment, as well as the role that each would play in its location. One member expressed his belief that the situation in most centres had deteriorated. Several delegations did not believe that they should prematurely give their views on the Secretary-General's proposal on integration, as that question should be part of the overall review of the whole question of information centres.

23. A large number of speakers, while expressing their support in principle for a comprehensive study of information centres, noted with concern the question of centres in the developing countries. They expressed the opinion that integration with UNDP was the "wrong therapy" for budgetary problems. Many of those countries commented on the paradox of seeming to cut back on

information availability at a time when interest in the United Nations was at an all-time peak. One speaker asked to see the work of the announced task force on the centres' plan and asked that Governments be kept informed. Several other speakers concurred in the belief that an analysis, taking into account the views of the host Governments, would allow for the most efficient use of resources available to the centres. A few delegations expressed the view that other elements of the Department's budget should be revised in order to expand further the network of information centres.

24. While all countries appreciated the economic realities facing the Department of Public Information, a number of speakers pointed to the disparity of budgetary allocations to United Nations information centres in different regions of the world. It seemed that the developed countries hosting information centres contributed almost nothing to their operations, while most of the resources allocated to all centres were spent there. In the words of one speaker, the financial "bottleneck" of the Department lay in the fact that the largest proportion of costs were incurred in the centres located in developed countries.

25. Many delegations underlined the fact that the critical reassessment of the United Nations information centres should not be done hastily nor should it jeopardize those countries most in need. They were strongly of the view that United Nations information centres were specific in nature and that their mandate was inherently different from the mandates given to other United Nations field offices, including UNDP. Several delegations questioned the meaning and the rationale of the announced integration of some information centres and felt that they could not be integrated with other United Nations offices without a resulting weakening of the information component.

26. A number of delegations referred to the important role that the centres could assume as part of a mechanism of an early warning system for preventive diplomacy. In that connection, another delegation said that they must serve in the role of a "chronicler" and anticipate events in their respective areas.

27. One speaker reminded the Committee that rent-free premises in Warsaw were waiting to be filled by a United Nations information presence. His country had fulfilled all of the Department's stated requirements, and he hoped that the Secretary-General would make the right decision in that regard. Further, he welcomed the Secretary-General's decision to open the United Nations interim offices for economic and information issues in some Republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States, while several other speakers requested further details on that issue. Some delegations also questioned the status of United Nations information centres in Beirut, Bujumbura and Ouagadougou, and in particular, that in some cases, decisions already taken for the appointment of centre Directors had not been implemented. One speaker also questioned the reasons for the delay in the reactivation of the information centre in Tehran.

28. In the same context, several delegations insisted on their desire to see all provisions of General Assembly resolution 46/73 implemented, including the mandated establishment of the centre in Sana'a, Yemen. One delegation made a request for a new centre in Gabon. One speaker presented a proposal to offer the facilities of the University for Peace to make possible the opening of a United Nations information centre in Costa Rica, in view of the fact that in practice that institution was already performing information functions and would fill a gap as an information focal point in Central America.

29. Several speakers supported programmes for regional centre Directors and another called for weekly periodic briefings by centre Directors for journalists, academics and non-governmental organizations in their areas.

30. In discussing the various information products of the Department, a number of delegations expressed support for its efforts to use the latest technology for the dissemination of information, as evidenced, for example, by a new contract with Reuters providing for the direct distribution of United Nations fact sheets and press releases.

31. Another Committee member, on behalf of a number of others, said that it would be appreciated if in the production of its written and audiovisual materials the Department took into account the various standards and practices used around the world.

32. A number of delegations spoke of the importance of radio programmes to their regions of the world, and in that context, several members highlighted the admirable work done by the Department's Asian Radio Unit, which, they felt, did not have adequate resources. One country was concerned that Urdu radio programmes were still not produced under a regular arrangement and called on the Department to rectify that situation. Another expressed interest in the production of radio programmes in Nepali.

33. Several representatives said that, in view of the wide availability of radio in developing countries, the Department should focus on strengthening radio production, particularly for Africa. They appreciated the efforts of the Department's African Radio Unit, but felt that the French language programming was too limited. They expressed the desire that more African radio networks disseminate United Nations radio programmes. It was suggested that the French programme "Bonjour l'Afrique" be expanded. One delegation said that it had recently agreed to provide the Department with radio transmitter facilities for broadcasts to South Africa.

34. One delegation stated that the Middle Eastern Unit in radio and television responsible for programming in Arabic should be strengthened with the necessary expertise and resources. Another cited the importance of the taped radio programme in Bahasa, Indonesia, which reached some 200 million people.

35. Another delegation urged the Department to reinstate its transmission service of United Nations proceedings and radio broadcasts to permanent missions via speaker telephone.

36. One delegation said that it hoped to see the backlog in the production of the United Nations Yearbook soon rectified, and another asked that the Department review certain "loss-making publications", with a view to placing them on a commercial footing.

37. One speaker said that Development Forum could be improved in terms of format and content, but should not be allowed to perish on financial grounds, as it was the only system-wide publication on development issues.

38. One delegation reiterated the call to have the yearly compilation of General Assembly resolutions published in Spanish and Arabic, in compliance with the General Assembly's call included in resolution 46/73.

39. Several delegations expressed their approval of the Department's dissemination of information to the public through non-governmental organizations, and spoke of their valuable role, especially in the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations. Another delegation congratulated the Department on recent awards won by several of its videos and films.

40. A number of speakers emphasized that efficient and improved assistance to the international media at Headquarters was unquestionably one of the most important means of disseminating United Nations information and enhancing the public's knowledge of the Organization. Several delegations paid a tribute to the Executive Media Service of the Department and underscored the importance of providing the highest possible level of information to the media.

41. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a number of others, stated that it might be appropriate at present to consider whether physical and logistical facilities for the media should be identified as an area of particular priority and attention.

42. It was emphasized that the time had come to record activities of the Secretary-General more closely. The press needed full-time access to him when appropriate. One delegation suggested that the Department should strengthen its requirements for accreditation, and possibly consider an exercise of re-accreditation.

43. Regarding other activities of the Department, one speaker noted the recent public opinion poll conducted in her country and reported that its results had indicated a wide awareness of the existence of the United Nations and its activities among the population.

44. Regarding the relationship between the Department and the Committee on Information, one delegation, which also spoke on behalf of a group, requested that each year the Committee undertake a fresh assessment and identify any changes that might be necessary in its approach to the information activities of the United Nations. He believed that the Committee had the responsibility to assess continuously how Member States could best assist the Department. He also said that, at times, the discharge of the mandates given to the

Department by the Committee resulted in a confusing range of co-equal tasks and responsibilities, leading occasionally to a lack of focus. There was thus a need to consolidate the role of the Committee as the body which, except in exceptional circumstances, recommended to the General Assembly the mandated activities of the Department.

45. One speaker said that it was the Committee's responsibility to refrain from overburdening the Department with too many tasks. Several members commented on the constructive nature of the inter-sessional cooperation between the Bureau of the Committee, spokespersons of the regional groups, the Group of 77 and China on the one hand, and the Department on the other, as agreed upon at the thirteenth session, and viewed it as a necessary precondition for proper realization of the Department's mandate.

46. One delegation suggested that in addition to financial ones, the Department inform the Committee of other problems that it faced in carrying out its activities. Such feedback to the Committee would assist in the formulation of the mandates.

47. In terms of the organization of the Committee's work for the current session, one delegation said that it would like to see the Committee's recommendations to the General Assembly streamlined and clarified on the basis of the consensus resolution 46/73. The new document needed to be a short, working one, dealing with pressing issues, such as those related to the United Nations information centres. Another speaker supported a consensus on the basis of the working paper submitted by the Bureau. It was noted also that resolution 46/73 needed to be implemented in full before there could be further progress.

48. The representative of the United Nations Correspondents' Association, who had been invited to address the Committee, said that as more information was being expected of journalists covering the United Nations, more was needed in terms of facilities. In practical terms, office space for journalists was a problem and must be expanded. Better access to computers and to background information was needed. Moreover, the area outside of the Security Council Chamber needed to be better equipped to handle the needs of the press.

49. At the closing of the debate, the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information provided additional information on the work of the Department and responded to specific questions posed by the delegations.

50. He provided further details on the plan to integrate some United Nations information centres with field offices of UNDP. Stressing the high value placed on local information programmes, he assured delegations that the integration project, which was fully in line with previous resolutions of the General Assembly, was aimed at a strong United Nations presence in the field and at better fulfilment of the mandated information programmes.

51. With regard to the improvement of public information activities, as set out in resolution 46/73, and the integration plan outlined in paragraph 14 of the Secretary-General's report to the Committee, the Under-Secretary-General stressed that both documents were complementary, aiming at more efficient use of resources through enhanced cooperation within the United Nations common system. Exact criteria and forms of the plan were currently being discussed by an interdepartmental working group.

52. The Under-Secretary-General emphasized the Department's excellent working relationship with the press. He informed the Committee that the Department was drawing up a master plan to address the professional and technological needs of a United Nations press corps in the 1990s. The plan, which would translate into a major financial commitment, could alleviate current problems of office space and equipment for correspondents accredited at Headquarters.

53. Recalling the concern of some delegations regarding parity in press coverage of meetings in English and French, he expressed his commitment to outfit conference rooms with the necessary work space and word-processing equipment for use by the Department's French press officers, wherever applicable.

54. He furthermore informed the delegations about plans to formulate, in cooperation with the Department for Peace-keeping Operations, a set of guidelines for the design of information programmes for peace-keeping and peacemaking missions. He expressed his support for the publication of French and Spanish editions of the Blue Helmets, but stressed the need to incorporate the necessary funding in the next budget submission.

55. Regarding the Department's information products, the Under-Secretary-General highlighted efforts to produce materials that would meet world standards and to place certain publications on a commercial footing. In that connection, he referred to the UN Chronicle, the Yearbook and Development Forum. With regard to the compendium of General Assembly resolutions, the Department of Public Information was ready to undertake the yearly production of Arabic and Spanish versions at the same time as the English and French versions that had been produced, advising the Committee on the resulting financial implications.

56. He noted the interest and appreciation of delegations for the Department's radio programmes that currently were produced in 19 languages. Those productions included a weekly quarter-hour programme in Urdu. In response to one delegation, he stressed that the Department would like to produce radio programmes in the Nepali language if funding could be ensured. Responding to a number of delegations' interest in French radio programming for Africa, he outlined the existing radio programmes produced in several African languages, in addition to radio programmes in French.

57. With regard to the geographical distribution of staff in the Professional category in the Department, it was pointed out that the guidelines of the General Assembly in that regard applied to the Secretariat as a whole.

However, the Department had been making every effort to ensure as equitable geographical distribution of staff as possible. Moreover, it has been making special efforts to increase the representation of women. Women currently occupied 37 per cent of all Professional posts in the Department, exceeding their representation in the Secretariat as a whole. The Under-Secretary-General pointed out the commitment by the Department to further improvement in that regard.

58. In response to interest in the Department's research activities, including the public opinion polling programme, the Under-Secretary-General stressed that the results of those surveys and other research projects were geared towards improving the Department's programme performance in terms of cost and quality standards.

Notes

1/ See A/SPC/46/3.

2/ See United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Records of the General Conference, Twenty-first Session, vol. I, Resolutions, sect. III.4, resolution 4/21.

3/ A/AC.198/1992/3.